Jesus Reclaimed

Jesus Reclaimed
Jewish Perspectives on the Nazarene

Walter Homolka

Translated by
Ingrid Shafer

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For Otto Kaiser, teacher and friend

I know a good Hamburg Christian who can never reconcile himself to the fact that our Lord and Saviour was by birth a Jew. A deep dissatisfaction seizes him when he must admit to himself that the man who, as the pattern of perfection, deserves the highest honor, was still of kin to those snuffling, long-nosed fellows who go running about the streets selling old clothes, whom he so utterly despises, and who are even more desperately detestable when they like himself apply themselves to the wholesale business of spices and dye-stuffs, and encroach upon his interests.

—Heinrich Heine *Shakespeare's Maidens and Women*

Contents

Foreword **xi**
Leonard Swidler

Translator's Preface **xv**
Ingrid Shafer

Preface **xix**

Introduction. When a Jew Looks at the Sources: The Jesus of History **1**
The Sources 1
The Early Years 2
Public Appearance 3
Jesus's Message 5
Arrest and Trial 7
Death 9

Chapter 1. Jesus and His Impact on Jewish Antiquity and the Middle Ages **13**
Jesus in the Mishnah and Talmud 15
The *Toledot Yeshu* 17
Rabbinic Polemics against Jesus 19
Christian Talmud Criticism and Censorship 22

Chapter 2. The Historical Jesus: A Jewish and a Christian Quest **29**
Jesus and the Jewish Enlightenment 29

The Christian Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Departure from Dogma 31
The Jewish Quest as Repatriating Jesus to Judaism 46
Judaism Out of Place: The Berlin Anti-Semitism Debate and Max Liebermann's "Jesus" 49
Leo Baeck and Adolf von Harnack: Controversy and Clashes between the Jewish and Christian Quests 56
The Jewish Quest from Joseph Klausner to Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich 68

Chapter 3. Jesus the Jew and Joseph Ratzinger's Christ: A Theological U-Turn **101**
Jesus Was a Jew: A Cultural Coincidence? 101
The "Rabbi Jesus": For Christians Only Important as Christ? 105
"Reading the Whole Bible in the Light of Christ": Joseph Ratzinger's Hermeneutics 106
Christian Faith and "Historical Reason" 107

Conclusion **111**

Bibliography **117**

Index **135**

Foreword

Leonard Swidler

Rabbi Walter Homolka carefully lays out the contributions Jewish scholars have been making to the ever-fuller historical understanding of the most influential Jew—or perhaps the most influential human being—ever, Jesus of Nazareth. It is built on solid scholarship but written in terms that make it accessible to the educated layperson.

Now in the early twenty-first century, we are still learning more about Jesus of Nazareth as a result of the "third quest of the historical Jesus." The first quest was launched during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment by scholars like Hermann Reimarus and gained momentum in the nineteenth century with the development of "scientific history" under scholars such as Leopold von Ranke. The quest ground to a halt early in the twentieth century with the declaration by Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann that it was impossible. All we had to go on were several faith statements about Jesus and, therefore, it was impossible to discern the human face of Jesus beneath all the projections.

The second quest was started by Bultmann's prize student, Ernst Käsemann, with his inaugural address at the University of Göttingen in 1954—he later became professor at my alma mater, the University of Tübingen. He argued that despite the "faith statement" nature of the Gospels, we *can* attain a historical picture of the real Jesus by using tools such as (1) *dissimilarity* (if a statement was

contrary to the aims of early Judaism or the early Christians, it likely came from Jesus), (2) *multiple attestation* (if a statement is found in more than one source), and (3) *coherence* (if a statement cohered with already accepted Jesus statements), to which was later added (4) *linguistic suitability* (if a statement made sense in Jesus' Aramaic).

How did these criteria work? Let me give just one example. The New Testament writings are full of negative statements about women by persons *other* than Jesus—for example, "Women should keep silence in the church" (1 Cor 14:33); "I suffer no woman to have authority over a man" (1 Tm 2:11); "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (1 Pt 3:1). Moreover, Jesus's younger Jewish contemporary Josephus wrote, "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man."[1] In contrast, in all four of the Gospels, *nowhere* does Jesus say or do anything negative regarding women; on the contrary, he says and does many, many positive things. Conclusion: those "feminist" remarks and actions attributed in the Gospels to Jesus could not stem from the frequently misogynist Jewish or Christian sources, but had to go back to Jesus himself.[2]

As helpful as the "principle of dissimilarity" was, at the same time it tended to alienate Jesus from his natural Jewish context—which did not make any sense. Hence, starting in the late 1970s, researchers focused on the broader background of the New Testament, and most especially its Jewish background. This approach drew the interest of many excellent scholars, including many of the most respected contemporary biblical scholars, resulting in what has been named the "third quest of the historical Jesus":

> In the 'third quest,' which first emerged predominantly in the English-speaking world, a sociological interest replaced a theological interest, and the concern to find Jesus a place in Judaism re-

> placed the demarcation of Jesus from Judaism; an openness to non-canonical (sometimes heretical) sources also replaced the preference for canonical sources.[3]

Jewish scholars were on this “third quest for the historical Jesus” long before we Christian scholars took up the quest. At one point we Christians finally realized that it is absolutely essential to view Jesus as Rabbi Yeshua Ha-Notzri, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, and to recognize all his relatives (Mary, Joseph, James, and so on) and first followers as fellow Jews if we are ever going to understand who the “founder” of Christianity was and what he was all about.[4]

Hence, it is with deep gratitude that I welcome this latest book in a glorious tradition of Jewish scholarship that is of immense help to its sibling, Christian scholarship. But it is much more than that. It is a handy handbook, a veritable vade mecum on the growing deeper historical understanding of Jesus among Jewish scholars and thus an important source for Christian and Islamic scholars alike.

Notes

1. Josephus, *Against Apion,* II, 201, cited in Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 2.
2. See Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988); Leonard Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).
3. Gerd Theissen, Annette Merz. *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 10.
4. I too, belatedly, joined the pioneer Christian scholars in this “third quest”: Leonard Swidler, *Yeshua: A Model for Moderns* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988; 2nd expanded ed., 1993).

Translator's Preface

Ingrid Shafer

While reading Walter Homolka's 2009 German book *Jesus of Nazareth,* I became convinced that it deserved to be broadly distributed beyond a German-speaking public, both academic and lay. I was especially fascinated by the second part of the title: *im Spiegel jüdischer Forschung* (in the Mirror of Jewish Scholarship). The title happened to coincide with one of my lifelong personal and academic passions—my conviction that all of us perceive what we consider reality through what I have called "hermeneutical lenses," spectacles or mirrors that determine what we "see" and what we consider "the truth." I spent forty-one years teaching interdisciplinary global history of ideas at a liberal arts college, and I never quite ceased being amazed at the extent to which my students, often unwilling captives in required courses, were threatened by having their preconscious assumptions challenged, especially concerning their religious or ideological convictions. Simply saying, "Jesus was a Jew" or "Jesus was not a Christian" raised a chorus of objections. Yet, this was precisely what I had hoped to communicate to others ever since I was in my late teens in the 1950s.

I was born in Innsbruck, Austria, one month before Hitler marched into Poland, and have been haunted by images of the Shoah ever since I was old enough to read magazines and question adults. Eventually, I began to seek a rational explanation for what seemed the uncon-

scious, knee-jerk anti-Jewish prejudices of so many "good people" I knew—teachers, classmates, even my father. No one, for example, seemed to question what to me appeared an absurd and hate-fomenting local story of the *Judenstein* (Jewstone), the shrine of the Blessed Andrew of Rinn [Anderl], the final resting place of a small boy whose throat, the teacher told us during a class outing, had been slit centuries before by a group of Jewish merchants. In the chapel, we saw the gray boulder on which the toddler had reportedly been slaughtered. We marveled at the imprint of the tiny body miraculously left behind, a silent witness to a crime so heinous it softened the very stone. We were encouraged to ponder the pictures on the chapel walls of the heinous act being committed, to kneel for prayer in the pews, and to imagine the child's agony and his mother's despair when she discovered her son's exsanguinated corpse hanging from a birch tree.

In the months and years following that class outing, in the recesses of my mind, doubts began to stir. Initially, I had been sickened by the teacher's story and the gruesome pictures of the murder. Eventually, the entire tradition, especially the miraculously imprinted stone, began to make no sense and seemed fabricated in order to terrify Christian children, malign Jews, and attract pilgrim business. This suspicion was reinforced by a fine priest, Professor Anton Egger, my religion teacher at the *Realgymnasium* [Secondary School], who was clearly unimpressed by the cult and who told me years later that he had doubted the legitimacy of the devotion all along. Especially when I discovered that a folk drama version of the Anderl murder by a Norbertine canon, Gottfried Schöpf, was still regularly performed, I began to connect the ways Jews of the past were depicted in pious tales with the ways ordinary Christians continued to view their Jewish contemporaries.

Between 1985 and 1994, due to the efforts of Bishop Reinhold Stecher, the blood libel story was officially de-

bunked, little Anderl was debeatified and the shrine was turned into a memorial to the victims of anti-Semitism, with the following inscription, here cited in translation, on a plaque: "This stone reminds us of a dark deed of blood as well as, by its very name, of the many sins Christians have committed against Jews. In the future it shall serve as a sign of our reconciliation with the people who have borne us the savior." However, this did not neutralize the extent to which the shrine attracted pilgrims and, with its graphic depictions of the murder, the extent to which it helped shape the ways countless visitors, especially children in their most formative years, viewed Jews, even after World War II, as it had for centuries before.

The power of image to shape one's understanding of reality and especially one's preconscious, intuitive assumptions cannot be overemphasized, and it affects people of all traditions as it grinds the hermeneutical lenses and shapes the mirrors through and in which we view/create the "other"—whether the "other" is Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, atheist, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal, and so forth ad infinitum. As long as they are not presented as the "one and only" privileged truth, these differing perspectives can serve as valuable steps toward a balanced, multifaceted, dynamically evolving understanding of whatever one seeks to comprehend. By absolutizing any one position, truth is reduced to dogma, which is, concerning the quest for the historical Jesus, precisely the position taken by Joseph Ratzinger when he insists that seeking to know Jesus cannot be legitimate unless it is done through the lens of the kerygmatic Christ of faith, which is clearly impossible for any non-Christian (and even some who consider themselves Christians). In this book, Homolka convincingly engages Ratzinger and makes a case for the importance of understanding how Jesus has been viewed in close to two millennia of Jewish tradition.

As an Austrian Catholic, I had countless opportunities to view and experience Christian attitudes toward Jews, simply by carefully looking at stained-glass windows and frescoes in churches (such as the Stations of the Cross) or listening to New Testament passages and homilies, especially around Easter. Even before I came to the United States in 1960, I was appalled at the way Passion plays continued to incite anti-Jewish sentiments. US versions seemed no less biased than their European counterparts, without necessarily going to the extremes of Mel Gibson's Anna Katharina Emmerick–inspired *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Hence, when I was offered the opportunity to translate the *Oberammergau* 2000 and 2010 textbooks and work with Jewish-Christian advisory groups collaborating with directors and producers in an attempt to show Yeshua accurately in the context of his milieu, I was happy to do so.[1] But I still wished there were scholarly books, accessible to the educated general public, apart from Géza Vermes' works (such as *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* from 1993), which deal with Jesus from a Jewish perspective. For me, Walter Homolka's book fills that void, and I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to introduce it to the world of English speakers.

Notes

This book was one of the last projects of Ingrid Shafer (1939–2014) who died 5 March 2014 at the age of 74.

1. James Shapiro, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play* (New York: Random House, 2000), 29ff.

Preface

When Reza Aslan published his academic study on the life of Jesus, he pursued his passionate interest in the person of Jesus as a historical figure. In *Zealot,* Aslan paints a picture of a zealous revolutionary from ignorant and poor Galilee, a man whose aim was not so much a heavenly kingdom as a Palestine liberated from Roman occupation. Did Jesus understand the concept of a God who became human? According to Aslan: no. Aslan's Jesus is fully and completely Jewish, animated by the messianic thought that King David's Israel must be resurrected as a state under God's authority. Readers' reactions were extremely divided. As it turns out, however, many were more troubled by the author rather than the content itself.[1] Reza Aslan is Muslim.

Aslan's book belongs to a genre that goes back to Hermann Samuel Reimarus in the eighteenth century. Research on the life of Jesus has experienced three major waves since that time. Aslan is probably the first Muslim author in this field, although he has always insisted that he writes from an impartial scholarly perspective.

The question whether he—a Muslim—has the right to do so is not new either; similar questions have been asked over the past two centuries as Jewish scholars became increasingly interested in the topic. But why might Jews be interested in Jesus? At first glance, one could surmise that research on Jesus through Jewish eyes does not exactly promise success. In the words of the British rabbi Jonathan Magonet, "The question of who Jesus was or might have been is actually of interest to very few Jews. Or to

be even more precise, among most Jews he has no significance whatsoever."[2]

This book attempts to do justice to Jesus of Nazareth in his Jewish setting and to depict the Jewish perception of Jesus throughout the centuries. It goes without saying that an unbiased view of Jesus by Jews is a difficult task. His historical impact represents a dramatic threat not only to Judaism as a whole, but also existentially to each individual Jew. Centuries of persecution, oppression, forced migration, and exclusion in the name of Jesus imprinted themselves deeply into the memory of a people whose fate in the "Christian West" has been anything but easy. This realization, however, also raises the question of whether Jewish scholars can engage in a meaningful discussion of Jesus as a person considering their concern with Christianity as a rival religion.

This book would not have been possible without my twenty-five years of academic engagement with Christianity from a Jewish perspective. My special thanks go to the faculty members who respectfully welcomed me and served as my intellectual inspiration between 1983 and 1986 while I was a Jewish guest student at the School of Protestant Theology at the University of Munich and the Munich School of Philosophy of the Jesuits in Germany. My dissertation, supervised by Christoph Schwöbel at King's College London,[3] drew on knowledge and experience from that time. Those insights proved valuable during the years of my practical rabbinate; which too were shaped by the manifold interest many Christian communities have in Judaism.

These experiences were further augmented in the committee for Jewish-Christian dialogue hosted by the Central Committee of German Catholics. In addition, I supplement these diverse experiences with the insight that knowledge gained from Judeo-Christian dialogue must be mediated for each generation anew. I am very grateful that I had the

opportunity to personally encounter outstanding Jewish philosophers of religion such as Schalom Ben-Chorin, Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich, and Pinchas Lapide. It is imperative for me to continuously recall the findings of previous generations of Jewish thinkers in order to preserve the ways Jews and Christians understand one another. This volume is an attempt to carry out this commission.

I am particularly grateful for Leonard Swidler's initiative to translate the German original into English. I am honored to have received his reverence for my work and, thanks to him, a thoroughly revised and much enhanced English version is now available. All of this would not have been possible without Ingrid Shafer's immense effort in taking it upon herself to translate the original book. Translation is always creation and so I would like to express my deep gratitude for her collaboration. I also wish to give special thanks to Hartmut Bomhoff whose extensive assistance helped this work achieve its present form. Thanks also to Marie-Luise Schmidt who revised the book for the English edition. And of course many thanks to the copy editors who combed through the final versions: Debra Corman, Caitlin Mahon, and David Heywood-Jones, as well as Caroline Diepeveen for creating the index.

Finally, we must give thanks to the National Gallery of London for giving us the rights to use one of Gerrit van Honthorst's (1592–1656) most famous paintings for the cover: *Christ before the High Priest*. Honthorst painted it in Rome around 1617; the work shows the powerful influence of Caravaggio. The scene is focused on the burning candle in the center of the composition and the arm and raised finger of the High Priest beside it. The book on the table in front of the High Priest contains the proscriptions of Mosaic Law. The painting is concentrated in theme: the relationship of Jesus the Jew and his message within his Jewish context.

Rabbi Walter Homolka, PhD, DHL

Notes

1. See John Williams. "The Life of Jesus: Reza Aslan Talks about *Zealot*." *New York Times,* 2 August 2013. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/02/the-life-of-jesus-reza-aslan-talks-about-zealot/. Accessed 24 July 2014.
2. Jonathan Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 125.
3. Walter Homolka, *Jewish Identity in Modern Times: Leo Baeck and German Protestantism* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995).

Introduction

When a Jew Looks at the Sources

The Jesus of History

The Sources

The early Christian Gospels are considered the most important sources for the life of the historical Jesus.[1] The Passion is of course the best documented episode. The earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, dates to around 70 CE and is based on earlier sources. The source with the highest degree of authenticity is the so-called Q source where we can read Jesus's words. John's Gospel—the latest of the four Gospels, dated around the end of the first century—has limited historical value because of its post-Easter faith perspective. The non-Christian testimonials (Flavius Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus) offer us little on Jesus's biography.[2] According to Johann Maier, the first but rather insignificant Jewish reference to Jesus is in the so-called Testimony Flavianum in Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII, pp. 63f. (cf. XX, pp. 199–203, the martyrdom of James), the wording of which was probably edited much later by Christians.[3] According to Josephus:

> Now about this time arose an occasion for new disturbances a certain Jesus, a wizard of a man, if indeed he may be called a man who was the most

> monstrous of all men, whom his disciples call a son of God, as having done wonders such as no man hath ever done… He was in fact a teacher of astonishing tricks to such men as accept the abnormal with delight… And when, on the indictment of the principal men among us, Pilate had sentenced him to the cross, still those who before had admired him did not cease to rave.[4]

The Early Years

There can be little learned from the Gospels about Jesus's youth. He came from Nazareth in Lower Galilee and, according to Matthew 1:18,[5] he was the first child of Mary (Miriam), born before the end of the reign of Herod the Great in 4 BCE (Mt 2:1) (presumably a few years earlier). His name, "Jesus," is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Yeshua" (God helps). The Evangelist Mark writes of at least six children: James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and the sisters of Jesus, who remain nameless (Mk 6:3). Two fictional lists of ancestors (Mt 1–17 and Lk 3:23–38) make Jesus of Nazareth the descendant of Abraham and King David, but like the topic of the virgin birth, they are not intended as historical statements, instead carrying theological significance.

It remains questionable whether Bethlehem near Jerusalem is in fact the birthplace of Jesus or was just associated with him because of God's promise to King David. The hypothesis that Jesus was born in the Galilean Bethlehem (*Beit Lehem Ha'glilit*) near Nazareth rather than in front of the gates of Jerusalem was argued as early as 1922 by Joseph Klausner (1874–1958).[6] He pointed out that the Galilean Bethlehem can be found in the Talmud and in Midrashic literature and excavations prove that it was a significant settlement at the time of Jesus; there is no such

evidence from the Herodian period for a Bethlehem in Judea. The sentence "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Lk 2:21) makes it clear that the family lived as Jews among Jews. As the firstborn son of a Jewish family, Jesus was redeemed in the Temple; later, Jesus learned his father's trade (Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55). Joseph was a craftsman (Greek τέκτων, often misleadingly translated as "carpenter"), probably involving working with wood, clay, or stones. According to Luke 2:42–48, at the age of twelve, Jesus impressed the scribes in the Jerusalem Temple with his knowledge of the Torah, which points to the possibility that he attended school, but might also be a fictional insertion to identify him as an outstanding teacher of the Torah. Although Jesus's mother tongue was Galilean Western Aramaic he must also have mastered Hebrew as according to Luke 4:16–17 Jesus read from the Torah before interpreting the text. His frequent question to his listeners "Have you never [/not] read … ?" (e.g., Mk 2:25, 12:10, 12:26; Mt 12:5, 19:4) implies reading competence.

Public Appearance

Based on the only clearly indicated date in the Gospels, the appearance of John the Baptist, it is most reasonable, according to biblical scholar Anton Vögtle, to assume a public ministry of around two years, an assumption that is consistent with a probable date of death during Passover 30 CE.[7] According to Luke 3:1 and 3:23, Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his public ministry: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea." In the twenties of the first century CE, Jesus belonged temporarily to the circle around John the Baptist, who emerged as an ascetic

prophet in Perea, a Transjordanian region near the Dead Sea, and who called for repentance in light of the imminent coming of the Lord and the Last Judgment. "Here John offered the forgiveness of sins in ritual form—independently of the possibilities of the temple in providing atonement. This was a vote of no confidence in the central religious institution of Judaism, which had become ineffective."[8] According to Luke 1:5, John was the son of the priest Zechariah, of the priestly class Abijah, and Elizabeth, from the family of Aaron.

Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River complies with the standard practice of the *tevilah,* the traditional full-body immersion for ritual purification. The meeting with John marked a decisive turning point. Jesus returned to Galilee to follow his own calling and in the spring of 28 or 29 CE he began his work as an independent charismatic itinerant preacher. He resided at Capernaum on the northeast end of Lake Gennesaret [Sea of Galilee] where his sphere of influence included the Jewish area north and east of the lake. At the time Galilee was considered an unruly region. The local Jewish population was isolated from the religious center in Judea and was threatened by pagan influence. Capernaum was right on the border between the territories of Herod Antipas and Philippus.

Jesus apparently found little support in Capernaum itself. From there, he moved on to the surrounding area with his first companions, Shimon, Andrew, Levi, and Mary Magdalene. He ordered his disciples to abandon parents, children, and the usual daily activities and to follow him: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). The Evangelist John writes of three years in which Jesus appeared in public, while the three Synoptic Evangelists mention only one year and also only one journey to Jerusalem. His specific itineraries cannot be definitively re-

constructed. Indeed, many locations listed in the Gospels were later additions and reflected the spread of Christianity at the time of their editorial revisions.

Jesus's Message

Based on the historical evidence and the scriptural sources available, one may very well ask just how can we summarize Jesus's teachings succinctly. Theissen attempts just this when he argues:

> At the centre of Jesus's message stood Jewish belief in God: for Jesus, God was a tremendous ethical energy which would soon change the world to bring deliverance to the poor, the weak and the sick. However, it could become the "hell-fire" of judgment for all those who did not allow themselves to be grasped by it. Everyone had a choice. Everyone had a chance, particularly those who by religious standards were failures and losers. Jesus sought fellowship with them.[9]

Jesus's style of preaching and argumentation was essentially rabbinic; his parables[10] (Hebrew: *meshalim*) followed biblical figurative language and the imagery was taken from the everyday lives of farmers and fishermen: the sower, the mustard seed, the fisher of men, the "calming" of the storm. His first disciples called him "Rabbi" (e.g., Mk 9:5, 11:21, 14:45; Jn 1:38, 1:49, 3:2, 4:31) or "Rabbouni" (Jn 20:16). This Aramaic title means "my master" and corresponded to the Greek διδασκαλς, or "teacher." It expressed respect and accorded Jesus the same rank as the Pharisaic scribes (Mt 13:52, 23:2, 23:7). According to Mark 6:1–6, Jesus's teachings were rejected in his hometown and he was said never to have returned there. But ac-

cording to Luke 8:2–3, Mark 1:31, and Mark 15:40, women from around Jesus's home supported him and his disciples. According to Mark 15:41, they remained with him to his death.

Like Hillel (30 BCE–9 CE), Jesus accorded the commandment "love thy neighbor" the same importance as fear of God and consequently placed them above all other Torah commandments (Mk 12:28–34). Based on a Christian lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of Judaism at Jesus's time, many believed, for a long time, Jesus represented an interpretation of halakha which could not be derived from Judaism. However, acknowledging the pluralist nature of Judaism at that time, this passage is now read as an inner Jewish interpretation of the Torah. For Joseph Klausner, the Gospels describe Jesus as an observant Jew:

> As much as the Synoptic Gospels are filled with hostility toward the Pharisees, they cannot avoid describing Jesus as a Pharisaic Jew in his attitude toward the law. Accordingly, he demands that sacrifices be offered at various occasions (Mk 1:44; Mt 5:23–24), he also does not object to fasting and prayer, if it is done without arrogance (Mt 6:5–7, 6:16, 6:18). He himself follows all ceremonial laws, wears tassels (Mk 6:56 and parallels), pays the half shekel for the temple, makes the pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover, says the blessing over wine and bread, etc. He warns his students against contact with Gentiles and the Samaritans; he answers the request to heal a pagan child in a spirit of ultra-nationalism.[11]

The "beatitudes" attributed to the Q source (Lk 6:20–22; Mt 5:3–11) assure the poor, the mourners, the powerless, and the persecuted that for them the kingdom is already present and certain for their future as a just turn

to compensate them for their suffering. They were the first and most important recipients of the words of Jesus. According to Luke 4:18–21, his “inaugural sermon” consisted only of the sentence “Today, this Scripture [Is 61:1–3] has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Thus, the biblical promise of a “Jubilee year” of forgiveness of debt and redistribution of land (Lv 25) was actualized for the contemporary poor. According to sociohistorical studies, the rural Jewish population suffered from exploitation, tax levies for Rome and the Temple, constant Roman military presence, debt slavery, hunger, epidemics, and social uprooting.[12] Jesus’s relief for the poor, healing, and the coincidence of prayer and almsgiving were similar to that of the later charismatic miracle worker Hanina ben Dosa (ca. 40–75 CE), a representative of Galilean Hasidim.[13] This is another reason why contemporary scholars of religion, unlike their predecessors, place Jesus of Nazareth entirely within the Judaism of his time and emphasize the similarity of his message to the teachings of the Pharisees.[14]

Arrest and Trial

Even if we combine all four Gospels, they still only really talk about Jesus’s final years. The sequence of his entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the Temple, arrest, interrogation in the house of the High Priest, delivery to Pilate, interrogation by the Romans, scourging, mockery, his execution by Roman soldiers, and his burial are fairly consistent in many details across all the Synoptic Gospels. The question of who was originally responsible for his arrest, however, is more controversial. For example, David Flusser questions whether the High Council meeting which supposedly condemned Jesus to death ever occurred.[15]

Jesus and his disciples spent the night at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Gethsemane, a rest area for Pass-

over pilgrims. On the night following the final meal shared by Jesus and his disciples, Judas Iscariot reportedly led a crowd armed with "swords and clubs" (Mk 14:43) or a "detachment of soldiers" (Jn 18:3) to arrest them. Paul Winter, therefore, assumed that Jesus was arrested and sentenced not by the Jewish High Council, the Sanhedrin, but by the Romans, accompanied by the armed Jews of the Temple Guard. In this scenario, the occupiers sought to suppress the potential political-revolutionary tendencies that existed among Jesus's followers or could have been stirred up by his message and deeds.[16]

Historians holding both positions assume that both the Romans and the Sadducee ruling class were interested in Jesus's arrest. The "Temple conflict" threatened both the Jewish elites' position of power as well as signifying unpredictable consequences for the autonomy of the Jewish community as a whole. In short, it could have caused long-term political instability.[17] According to this interpretation, Caiaphas's statement, recorded in John 11:50, that "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" is plausible.

Two contemporary Jewish legal experts have examined Jesus's trial.[18] Haim Cohn (1911–2002), Supreme Court judge of the state of Israel and legal historian, examined the trial extensively and provided a detailed picture of the most likely events surrounding the Crucifixion.[19] His book was published in 1968 in Hebrew and in 1980 in English. Justice Cohn presents a search for forensic and historical analysis to create a legal, political, and religious context for the events as they might really have happened. Cohn's readers are encouraged to give their own verdict on whether we can actually speak of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus.

The Hessian attorney general Fritz Bauer (1903–1968) is best known for his legal processing of a number of Nazi

war crimes. His essay "The Trial of Jesus" (1965)[20] is essentially a plea for a more humane legal system. He writes, "Pilate's verdict reflects the human shortcomings of all judgment, the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the actual events, the excessive demands on the judge by public opinion and its pressure on his verdict."[21] Bauer reminds us that from the religious Christian point of view, the "trial of Jesus culminating in the Crucifixion represented God's judgment and will; it was part of the Almighty's plan for the world; without it there would be no Christianity."[22]

Death

All four Gospels are unanimous that the execution sanctioned by Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea (26–36 CE) took place the day before the Sabbath, thus on a Friday. This was the main Passover holy day for the Synoptics as it followed the Seder and so, according to the Jewish calendar, it must have been the fifteenth of Nisan. In the Gospel of John, however, it was just before Passover—the fourteenth of Nisan. This dating, which attests to the strong narrative and fictional character of this late Gospel, has theological significance: Jesus would have died at the time of the slaughter of the Passover lamb.

According to Mark 15:27, Jesus was crucified along with two bandits on the hill of Golgotha (place of the skull) outside Jerusalem's walls and, according to Luke 23:35–37, it was accompanied by the scorn and derision of those present. The pre-Markian Passion narrative provides no additional details and only indicates that Jesus was "crucified at the third hour" and "died at the ninth hour." Calendric and astronomical calculations suggest 30 CE as the most likely year of death.[23]

Notes

1. For a more thorough analysis, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), 17–124; Peter J. Tomson, *"If This Be from Heaven …": Jesus and the New Testament Authors in Their Relationship to Judaism* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
2. Cf. Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Jürgen Roloff, "Jesus von Nazareth," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* ed. Hans Dieter Betz, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), vol. 4, col. 463f.
3. Johann Maier, *Judentum von A bis Z: Glauben, Geschichte, Kultur* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 231.
4. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities: Books XVIII–XIX,* tr. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 48.
5. Unless otherwise specified all biblical references are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha,* edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland Murphy, copyright 1991.
6. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teachings* trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Bloch, 1989; Hebrew ed., 1922), 231f.
7. Anton Vögtle, "Jesus Christus nach den geschichtlichen Quellen," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* ed. Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), vol. 5, col. 922ff.
8. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 569.
9. Ibid., 570.
10. Gary G. Porton, "The Parable in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature," in *The Historical Jesus in Context,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 206–221.

11. Joseph Klausner, "Jesus von Nazareth," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Berlin: Eschkol, 1932), vol. 9, col. 69f. See also Herbert W. Basser, "Gospel and Talmud," in Levine, Allison, and Crossan, *Historical Jesus in Context,* 285–295; Bruce Chilton, "Targum, Jesus, and the Gospels," in Levine, Allison, and Crossan, *Historical Jesus in Context,* 238–255.
12. David L. Balch and John E. Stambaugh, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 102.
13. Bernd Kollmann, "Paulus als Wundertäter," in *Paulinische Christologie,* ed. Udo Schnelle and Thomas Söding (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 95f.
14. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 571. See also Schalom Ben-Chorin, "Judentum und Jesusbild," in *Neues Lexikon des Judentums,* ed. Julius H. Schoeps (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 400–402.
15. David Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 138–142.
16. Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus,* ed. T. A. Burkill and Géza Vermes, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 44–48, 136ff.
17. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 468, 571.
18. See also David R. Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus: A Study in the Gospels and Jewish Historiography from 1777 to the Present Day* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).
19. Haim Cohn, *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (New York: Ktav, 1980).
20. Fritz Bauer, "Der Prozeß Jesu," in *Fritz Bauer: Die Humanität der Rechtsordnung; Ausgewählte Schriften,* ed. Joachim Perels and Irmtrud Wojak (Frankfurt: Campus, 1998), 411–426.
21. Ibid., 424.
22. Ibid., 411.
23. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus,* 572; Roloff, "Jesus von Nazareth," vol. 4, col. 466.